

With end of term near, Atlantic County prosecutor Ted Housel makes it clear he's a quiet man

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Atlantic County Prosecutor Ted Housel likes being in control.

Housel has less than six months left on his five-year term, but the former defense attorney and Democrat will not say whether he thinks he will get a second term. Former Democratic Gov. Jon S. Corzine nominated Housel, but Republican Gov. Chris Christie is not likely to cross party lines to name a prosecutor.

Courthouse speculation about possible replacements runs from his first assistant, James McClain, to local defense attorney John Zarych. Christie does not discuss his nominations before making them, spokesman Michael Drewniak said. Once he makes his nomination, it would have to pass through the state Senate Judiciary Committee and then the full Senate.

Housel handles the question as he has his tenure: giving out only the information he wants to release. In this case, he won't talk about the future at all.

"I like controls," he said during a recent interview. "Not control, controls."

Controls are the details of a crime that can be used to ensure a case's integrity — and make sure that a confession is real, and not based on specifics read in a newspaper or seen on television.

"We have our own prohibitions in New Jersey," Housel said. "There is so much we can't say."

Often, however, he seems to enjoy not saying it.

After the body of Atlantic City teen Nadirah Ruffin was found in the Schuylkill River last April, Housel ended his news conference by saying: "Subject to my normal style of never really answering anything, I will take limited questions."

The former private-practice defense attorney took a significant pay cut to become prosecutor. But he enjoys the job, which he said in 2007 he planned to make one term. He won't comment on that now.

Housel doesn't see the office as political.

"I run it as completely apolitical," he said. "Once I took my oath, I had nothing to do with politics. Not that I was that political before."

Instead, the move from a lucrative private practice to heading one of the busiest prosecutor's offices in the state was merely a change of client.

"My client is Atlantic County," he said. "My duty is to that client."

Ask him, and he will tell you he's served the client well.

There have been problems, he admits. For instance, 2010 was an especially difficult year, with more than 70 percent of the homicide cases going unsolved. The rate was the worst in the state.

Since then, two of those open cases have been solved, and 2011 ended with nearly two-thirds of fatal cases closed.

Last year's successes included the arrest of three Camden men in the fatal carjacking of a couple from the Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort. The man was killed, his girlfriend wounded.

Housel held nearly daily news conferences, releasing pieces of information — including video of the suspects and a description of the stolen car they were believed to be driving — that led to several tips and arrests over three days.

That wasn't the first time Housel used a news conference to his advantage.

He held his first news conference two months into his term. A British visitor had been stabbed in Margate on Aug. 12, 2007. The next day, Housel was showing members of the media surveillance video of a person being sought for questioning.

At the time, Housel would not give any information about the man. Even after Robert Davies turned himself in, Housel made no announcement. About a week later, Davies was charged with aggravated manslaughter.

Last year, Davies was convicted of reckless manslaughter, and he is serving a 21-year term. An appeal is pending.

Housel's big regret is that the killing of four prostitutes found dead in Egg Harbor Township's West Atlantic City section remains unsolved. He inherited the 2006 case.

Many thought there might be hope when bodies of prostitutes started turning up in New York last year.

"Not hope based on fact and logic," he said. "There were superficial similarities."

While Housel may keep some things quiet, it's no secret that he's an involved prosecutor.

He used his knowledge of Russian in a personal meeting with the family of Konstantin Sergeivich Kraev, 22, who was working his second summer in Atlantic City when he was shot and killed Sept. 23, 2010, as he walked home after dropping off a friend.

That crime remains unsolved.

After a fatal carjacking at Trump Taj Mahal in May 2010, Housel enlisted his daughter Victoria, who is fluent in Spanish, to communicate with the victim's family.

Allowing Martin Caballero's family to speak in their first language eased the meeting, which ended in a hug between Caballero's widow and Victoria Housel.

He also makes sure to read everything he signs.

“I have red pens on my desk for a reason,” he said. “The people in my office quickly learned I wasn’t going to sign off on anything I had not gone over.”

Housel notes he came on at a horrible time financially — the cusp of a recession. That caused low morale early in his tenure, but he said things have improved. However, he continues to operate one of the busiest prosecutor’s offices in the state with one of its smallest budgets, he says.

He has pushed for technology and better communication among the county’s municipalities and his office. He also is pushing for grant money to fund those projects.

The cataloging of Atlantic City’s privately owned surveillance cameras is his “baby.” The project has helped in several cases, including arrests of the alleged perpetrators in a shooting onto the Boardwalk after last year’s Fourth of July celebration.

He does miss the courtroom, he admits. But he doesn’t believe the county’s top prosecutor should be arguing cases.

“I think it gives the wrong perception, that this case is of a certain importance because the prosecutor is handling it,” he said. “It also would require legions of assistants, which takes away from other cases. As much as I’d like to, it’s not the job.”

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